



Neo-Realism and the Philosophy of Royce

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Source: *The Philosophical Review*, May, 1916, Vol. 25, No. 3 (May, 1916), pp. 378-382

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of *Philosophical Review*

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2178270>

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NEO-REALISM AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF ROYCE.

THE object of the following brief considerations is not to pass judgment on the value of either of the two philosophies under discussion, but rather to suggest a point of view from which their agreements and differences may appear somewhat more significant than they usually appear to those who approach philosophy from the exclusively epistemologic interest.

If economy of thought be, as Mach and others have it, one of the main objects of science, then philosophic labels like Realism, and Idealism, are among the most useful instruments of thought. But to those who care for accuracy, these labels appear as snares and stones of stumbling—they are apt to hide from us the important differences which separate many of those who call themselves idealists, and the more important bonds which connect realists and idealists. Vital philosophic achievements, we all know, do not grow out of the effort to spin out the consequences of simple formulae such as those which sum up the distinction between realism and idealism, though such formulae may have a decisive influence in giving direction and form to the effort after coherency and system which is at the heart of philosophy. While philosophy, like law, must of necessity always strive after consistency, it is true as a matter of fact that it never completely attains its goal. The very effort after coherency and system is conditioned for any genuine philosophy by its starting point, the actual complex of intellectual needs growing out of the material of the philosopher's world of experience. If this be so, then the suggestion naturally arises, that the fact that both neo-realism and the philosophy of Royce endeavor to assimilate the general results of modern logical and mathematical studies, may be more significant than the attempt to condense the whole of Royce's philosophy into the dictum that the Absolute is the locus of all our meanings, or neo-realism into the doctrine that objects are independent of our knowledge. The fundamental differences between neo-realism and the philosophy of Royce

can from this point of view be traced to their respective attitudes to the problems of religion.

The systematic neglect of mathematics on the part of all great influential philosophies of the nineteenth century is obvious on the most cursory survey. Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Lotze, Mill, Hamilton, Green, Cousin, Comte,¹ Rosmini, all show how social, theologic, and psychologic interests absorbed all attention. Philosophers like Bolzano or Cournot who took the philosophic importance of mathematics seriously, were assigned to obscurity. Now in intellectual affairs, it is difficult to say which is the cause and which the effect. But there can be no doubt that the neglect of mathematics and the prevalence of nominalism and atomism, were intimately connected. This can be seen perhaps most clearly in Mill's logic in which the emphasis on particular 'facts,' 'states' of mind, leads to the complete degradation of deduction (and consequently of all exact mathematics) as a source of truth.² At any rate, whether we take the phenomenalist idealism which comes to Mill from Hume, the so-called objective idealism of the Hegelian school of Green and Caird, or the practical idealism of the Neo-Kantians, we find them all assuming that the world which is our starting point is a brute, disconnected manifold; and while these philosophies differ in the method by which the initial atomism is overcome, they all regard the connections or relations of things as a contribution of 'the mind' to the world.

Now it would take us far afield to indicate all the difficulties resulting from the assumption that mathematical relations or entities like numbers, are mental. But it is clear that this view throws no light at all on the peculiarities of mathematical procedure which distinguishes it from physics or psychology. When a mathematician is investigating the property of a given equation or curve, it is precisely as fitting to tell him that he is looking for the product of his own creation as it would have been

¹ I include Comte because though brought up on mathematical physics, his whole philosophy was controlled by practical demands—due to the influence of St. Simon.

² The exaggerated importance attached to Mill over and above more fruitful logicians like De Morgan and Boole, would not have been possible if philosophers had paid more attention to mathematics.

to have told Leverier and Adams that in looking for Neptune they were looking for the product of their own mind. Hence, when philosophy could no longer ignore the progress of mathematics and symbolic logic, there was bound to be a reaction against the traditional idealism and a preference for the type of realism that followed in Greece close on the first discovery of mathematical method. Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* and the chapter in his *Problems of Philosophy* dealing with Plato's Doctrine of Ideas, seem to me still the most significant expression of the new yet essentially Platonic realism.¹ There have, to be sure, been other motives for neo-realism besides the mathematical one, *e. g.*, the natural reaction against the sweeping claims of psychologism, expressed with such admirable self-control by von Meinong. But it is significant to note that the one doctrine which all the six authors of Neo-realism press in their book is the non-mental character of logical and mathematical entities. In thus emphasizing the objectivity of the relational structure of the real world, neo-realism takes itself completely out of the scope of Professor Royce's dialectical objections against realism, which will be found on close examination to be all arguments against dualistic or atomistic realism that is incompatible with the linkage of facts.

The realistic arguments as to the nature of mathematics were first advanced by Royce in the two volumes of *The World and the Individual*, several years before the appearance of Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*. The mathematician, we are told, is as much a student of given facts as is the chemist or business man. He is "as faithful a watcher as the astronomer alone with his star" (I, p. 256). The result of his observations abound in the unexpected as much as do the facts of any other field of research. To be sure Royce adds that what the mathematician watches is *in a sense* the result of his own play or activity; but this "sense" is made clear by the example of the diagram. The mathematician makes his diagram or set of postulates, but he cannot wilfully alter the consequences which alone are, after all, the specifically

¹For further indications of this I may here refer to my paper on the *Present Situation in the Philosophy of Mathematics* (1910), and to the review of *Neo-Realism*, *Journal of Phil.*, VIII, 533 ff. and X, 197.

mathematical facts. You may call the spirit from the deep but you cannot control his actions after you have called him.¹ This purely realistic account of mathematics is developed in Professor Royce's address on "The Sciences of the Ideal" (read before the St. Louis Congress) in the monograph on the *Relation of the Principles of Logic to the Foundations of Geometry*, and his essay on "Logic" in volume entitled the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. The fruitful character of deductive reasoning as a source of truth appears even in his *Sources of Religious Insight* (pp. 88ff.).

To those who view Royce's philosophy as a type of Neo-Hegelianism this attention to mathematics may appear as an introjected episode. (Royce's first introduction of mathematical considerations in the *World and the Individual* caused considerable surprise and misgiving doubts among idealists.) But those who have had the good fortune of membership in his logic seminar have learned how characteristic of his thought is the complete objectivity of all logical and mathematical considerations. The truth is that a careful survey of the whole corpus of Professor Royce's writings fully bears out his contention, in the preface to the *Problems of Christianity*, that his philosophy is not in any true sense Hegelian. Such a survey seems to me to show how profoundly Royce's philosophy has been influenced, not only by the Kantian doctrine of the primacy of the practical reason,² but also by the metaphysic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For whatever may be our objections to the Kantian metaphysics, we must not forget that Kant himself began as a mathematical physicist, that he had taught mathematics and that a primary object of his *Critique of Pure Reason* was to show the possibility of mathematics and physics as apodeictic sciences. The Kantian

¹ In his concept of a common world by means of the process of interpretation, in the second volume of the *Problem of Christianity*, Professor Royce has suggested a method which, if it can successfully be carried out, would overcome the neo-realist antithesis between finding and making propositions true. An adequate discussion of this, however, is not in order before Professor Royce gives us a fuller account of his meaning.

² This shows itself not only in the conclusion of his paper on Kant in the *Jour. of Spec. Phil.*, but also as the method of postulates in Chs. 9-10 of the *Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. In his general attitude to the importance of the 'practical' in philosophy Royce, like James, has been profoundly influenced by Lotze.

philosophy at least never identified the abstract and the unreal. At any rate it ought to be noted that the very first of Professor Royce's published writings, the *Primer of Logical Analysis*, already shows a strong interest in symbolic logic.

It is, however, precisely Professor Royce's rejection of the Kantian distinction between possible and actual experience that is at the basis of the fundamental divergence between neo-realism and the idealism of Royce. This rejection of the Kantian doctrine seems to me to grow out of the needs of natural theology which looms so large in all of Professor Royce's writings. Religious philosophies are for the most part doctrines of hope or guarantees of the efficacy of moral effort. Hence they tend to assume that the object of our striving is already in some sense actual. This leads to the rejection of all possibility from the nature of the Absolute. The Absolute of Professor Royce's philosophy, however, differs from the realistic God of Aristotle. It is not outside of mundane things but all-inclusive; and this identification of the Good with the Whole leads to the familiar difficulty as to the problem of evil. It compels us to assume that even now the world is better or richer because of the presence of vice, crime, proverty, disease and all the horrors of war. Such philosophies have always been sources of strength and comfort to many. Nor can any one rightly accuse such a philosophy of quietism who notices how few are willing to fight unless they are assured beforehand that victory is in some way certain. Neo-realism, however, does not share this strong faith, so impervious to the vicissitudes of human experience. It is not that neo-realism is hostile to the proper interpretation of religious experience. As I have tried to indicate elsewhere, its logic, with its emphasis on the organizing relations, is a better instrument for social philosophy than any nominalistic philosophy which must contain latent atomism or individualism. But neo-realism sees no evidence that any human community like church or state necessarily embodies our highest goal. The neo-realist lives in a world in which there are all sorts of possibilities of which only a small number succeed in becoming actual, and where all our gods or goods *may* meet with defeat.

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